

"It brought some kind of neatness to mankind"

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DOI:

[10.3366/E000197200900103X](https://doi.org/10.3366/E000197200900103X)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Skinner, K 2009, "It brought some kind of neatness to mankind": literacy, development and democracy in 1950s Asante', *Africa*, vol. 79, no. 04, pp. 479-499. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E000197200900103X>

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'It brought some kind of neatness to mankind': Mass literacy, community development and democracy in 1950s Asante

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Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute, Volume 79, Number 4, 2009, pp. 479-499 (Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press



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'IT BROUGHT SOME KIND OF NEATNESS TO MANKIND': MASS LITERACY, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN 1950s ASANTE

Kate Skinner

Upon its election victory of February 1951, the African nationalist Convention People's Party (CPP) set about implementing its manifesto commitment to 'a planned campaign to abolish illiteracy' (Austin 1964: 130). Unlike the CPP's plans for the extension of fee-free elementary schooling, the Plan for Mass Literacy and Social Welfare commanded cross-bench support from newly elected African politicians in the Legislative Assembly, and it was voted through unanimously, to the acclaim of both pro- and anti-CPP newspapers. The Plan was drafted largely by expatriate civil servants and it reiterated many of the orthodoxies on education, development and democracy that were expressed in Colonial Office blueprints for Africa (ACEC 1943, 1948). Mass mother-tongue literacy was seen as a vehicle for increasing the rationality of Gold Coast villagers, and thus their receptiveness to a range of expensive governmental interventions in public health and in the formal education of children. The Plan also anticipated that mass education campaigns would serve as a force for social cohesion. Young school leavers, it argued, were inclined to 'rebel against the dullness and squalor of village life' (Gold Coast 1951: 5) by drifting to the towns in search of scarce white collar jobs. The Plan envisaged that community development activities would reduce rural-urban migration by improving sanitation and infrastructure, and increasing villagers' opportunities for novel and educative leisure activities.

Most importantly, however, literacy campaigns and related community development activities would depend on unpaid local volunteers, thus providing school leavers with the opportunity 'to do something for the common people—for their less fortunate fellow citizens' (Gold Coast 1951: 6). This ethic of voluntary service was deemed vital in building a healthy democracy at the grassroots, for while the British had transferred considerable powers to elected African representatives at the national level (in the new Legislative Assembly), it was only after the elections of 1951 that local government reform was implemented. Mass literacy campaigns were explicitly linked to the new process by which powers would be transferred away from Native Authority councils of chiefs and elders, and towards local and district

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councils that included a two-thirds majority of elected members. The Plan envisaged that mass literacy would support this process at both the technocratic and the spiritual level:

A literate adult population is almost essential for the effective operation of local councils and a modern system of local government. But more than this, the spirit of community development at the village level is the spirit which will give life and vigour to the new forms of local government. (Gold Coast 1951: 5)

The Plan for Mass Literacy and Social Welfare was to be implemented by a nationwide network of trained field officers. Staff would run annual literacy campaigns as well as year-round activities in the villages, with the help of unpaid volunteer tutors and local organizers. At least one rural training centre was to be established in each region, and, through these centres, volunteer tutors/organizers and their students could meet with salaried government personnel who passed on skills in carpentry, masonry, bricklaying, irrigation, cookery, sewing, child care, sports and music. These skills formed the basis of the self-help projects, the 'women's work' and the 'improving' leisure activities that were expected to grow out of the literacy campaigns. Formally described as 'mass education and community development', these activities were popularly known simply as 'mass education'.

Expatriate civil servants were aware of the need for the rapid Africanization of the new Department of Social Welfare and Community Development. They argued that this should be accomplished by professionalizing mass education work, and establishing a hierarchy with opportunities for the internal training and promotion of African school leavers (du Sautoy 1958: 18, 65–71, 157–74). The lowest rung on this ladder was the Mass Education Assistant (MEA), who was normally expected to have formal education up to Standard VII. Employees were expected to speak and write the language of the locality in which they were posted and to demonstrate familiarity with its social and economic characteristics.

This in turn meant that the majority of local-level, front-line personnel in the Ashanti Region were themselves Asantes. Literacy classes had to be conducted in Twi language, and could only be started up where literate Asantes were available and willing to volunteer as unpaid tutors. Similarly, the day-to-day implementation of self-help projects could only proceed where voluntary local leadership was forthcoming. In this sense, mass education was as much a negotiation between Asantes as it was a colonial project, with the balance of activities, and the ideas that underlay them, diverging from original policy guidelines in significant respects.

The first part of this article uses material gathered from interviews in 2004 and 2008, as well as from the contemporary African-owned press, to explore how Asante participants conceptualized mass education and explained its popularity. The later sections investigate a paradox: despite the apparent compatibility of mass education with local ideas

of individual and collective improvement, literacy campaigns and the related community development activities were not effectively integrated into the new system of elected local government during this period of anti-colonial nationalism. In order to explain this, the article focuses on the small town of Kwaso, which today lies 12.5 miles south-east of Kumasi, on a branch off the Kumasi–Ejisu–Accra road.

Despite its physical proximity to Ejisu, Kwaso does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Ejisuhene or any of the other Asante *omanhene*. Like several of the neighbouring Mponua towns (that is, towns in the area between Kumasi and Lake Bosomtwe), Kwaso was originally settled by members of the Aduana matriline. It serves the Asantehene (king) 'direct', and retains a special relationship with him. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as a 'Kumasi town' (for example, by Wilks 1975: 577), in spite of its rural atmosphere and location. During the 1950s, Kwaso hosted the rural training centre, and residents claimed that their town was the pioneering base of mass education and community development across the Ashanti Region. The Mponua Local Council and the Kumasi District Council records enable us to look beyond the policy rhetoric, and to suggest why the anticipated relationship between literacy, development and democracy did not materialize in this era of African nationalism.

'GOLD COAST VILLAGERS NOT BACKWARD'

The first nationwide literacy campaign was rolled out in 1952. The Department's published report indicated that, in the Ashanti Region alone, 754 literacy classes, containing 15,520 adult learners, had been formed in 307 towns (Gold Coast 1952: 13). The owners (John and Nancy Tsiboe) and editor (Sam Arthur) of the *Ashanti Pioneer* newspaper became vocal opponents of the CPP during the early 1950s. However, whilst bitterly critical of most government policies, the *Ashanti Pioneer* tracked mass education activity with enthusiasm, carrying news reports on literacy examination passes and the completion of self-help projects, as well as lively commentary in the 'Brother Culture' column and 'Okukuseku's Diary'. The *Ashanti Pioneer's* African reporters and columnists presented mass education as an onslaught on 'backwardness' in the rural areas, and they urged those Asantes who had enjoyed the benefits of formal schooling to perform their duty by 'enlightening' and 'uplifting' less fortunate villagers through voluntary activity.

The salaried mass education workers were individually named and praised for their endeavours in the Ashanti Region, while towns exhibiting high levels of activity were commended for their readiness to stir themselves from their 'apathy' to become 'new commun[ities]... upward looking in attitude... receptive to new ideas... ready for the change that comes with progress' (*Ashanti Pioneer*, 29 March 1952, quoting Mr S. M. Boison, who was training at Kwaso). The *Ashanti Pioneer* (10 April 1952) claimed that, by April

1952, community development projects valued at £10,000 (comprising local and central government grants as well as voluntary contributions) were in progress in the Ashanti Region, and this was presented as tangible evidence of the Gold Coast's potential to become a modern nation state. Reporting on the tour of a visiting UNESCO fellow in July 1954, and summarizing the favourable impression made upon him, the newspaper ran a front-page headline: 'Gold Coast Villagers Not Backward' (*Ashanti Pioneer*, 2 July 1954).

In contemporary newspaper reports, as well as in interviews that I conducted in the Ashanti Region in 2004 and 2008, the popularity of mass education was consistently explained by reference to the concept of 'enlightenment' (*anibué* – literally to open the eyes).¹ At a ceremony for graduates of the literacy classes, the volunteer leader of the Konongo literacy committee, Rev. S. B. Essamuah, explained that 'formerly there was darkness in the land of Ashanti Akim. . . . Now that some of them had learnt to read and write, they had seen the light' (*Ashanti Pioneer*, 12 August 1952). Mr Oduro Kwateng, who served as an MEA in his home area of Akropong-Ashanti from 1954 to 1960, extended this analogy of religious enlightenment beyond the literacy classes and into the community development activities. He likened his supervision of projects to the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah, in which Nehemiah performed God's work by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem after the Jews' exile by the Babylonians. Mass education, he concluded, 'came to enlighten the lives of Asante people, because those days were thought to be very gloomy [laughter]' (interview, 9 March 2004). As an adult student in his hometown of Kwaso, Mr S. K. Manu had learnt to read in Twi and play the trumpet, as well as performing communal labour on local road-building projects and a maternity clinic. He summarized mass education as 'an exercise of enlightenment' that had 'opened our eyes' (interview, 27 April 2004).

Peel observes that terms for 'opening the eyes' appear in several West African languages, and that, while the mechanisms and avenues for 'enlightenment' may change with historical and economic context, for the Yoruba of Nigeria, *Olaju* consistently refers to

a social state or process of increased knowledge and awareness which is a condition of greater effectiveness and prosperity. Now as the individual, unmetaphorically, becomes 'enlightened' by opening his eyes, a society does so through opening itself to experience of the outside world. (1978: 144)

Significant for Peel is the shift from a pre-colonial, esoteric understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power, to a twentieth-century understanding which was tied to a 'conversionary religion' (Christianity), and thus implied that the enlightened individual would also seek to open the eyes of others. This provides a starting point from which to explore how Asantes conceptualized and ordered mass

¹ Twi spellings in this article follow Christaller (1933 [1881]).

education, for, at one level, participants' emphasis on 'enlightenment' can be read as an extension of Asantes' longer engagement with, and selective adoption of, missionary Christianity and formal primary schooling. Later, however, I will point to other concepts which pre-dated missionary Christianity and which were also invoked in participants' explanations for the popularity of mass education.

While policy documents presented mass education as a secular governmental initiative, in reality the Department depended heavily on Christian missionary bodies for vernacular reading materials and on the graduates of mission and church primary schools for volunteer teaching of adult students. In encouraging its members to serve as volunteer tutors, the Christian Council of the Gold Coast argued that 'the [literacy] campaign is simply an extension of what the Churches have till now been doing almost alone' (cited in Gold Coast 1952: 25). The Council urged its African members to emulate the sacrifices of an earlier generation of European missionaries, and pointed out that the campaign offered an opportunity to

strengthen the Churches' own life by making every member and every baptismal candidate a Bible reader. . . . The specially graded readers, 'The Story of Jesus', in Vernaculars, prepare the way for reading the Bible itself. . . . heathen illiterates can be introduced to the Gospel. . . . (Cited in Gold Coast 1952: 25–6)

The Akan (Asante-Twi, Akwapim-Twi, Fante) and Ewe language primers that were mass-produced by the Department in the early 1950s were based on work carried out by missionaries or by mission-educated African teachers and church leaders. In comparison with both Nigeria and East Africa, the Gold Coast government was late in establishing a Vernacular Literature Bureau (VLB) in 1950 (Read 1952: 68–75), and civil servants admitted that new literates usually had little reading matter other than the vernacular publications of local mission presses.² Some former adult students explained that whilst they or their classmates had quickly forgotten how to write through lack of practice, they could remember how to read because they used the Bible in church (interview with Veronica Afi, Kuntunase, 29 April 2004). The VLB's fortnightly Twi newspaper, *Nkwantabisa*, was the only other text that former students could recall reading. In desperation, the Department exhorted the Cocoa Marketing Board to make its English pamphlet 'Kofi the Good Farmer' available in Twi (Gold Coast 1951: 17); one can only hope that this was a more gripping read than its title would suggest.

Evening classes were often held inside church primary school buildings, and a former literacy examinations officer, Nana Adjei Turum, suggested that non-certificated pupil-teachers and Standard VII leavers from the church primary schools were the main source

² M. H. Dorman to the Chief Commissioner, Ashanti, 20 July 1951. PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 6/10/17.

of volunteer tutors (interview, Kokofu, 29 April 2004). This reliance by the Department on volunteer literacy tutors meant that the scope for mass education work in any given area was influenced by earlier provision of missionary and church primary schools, and the creation of a pool of potential tutors who were literate in Twi. Kwaso, which was chosen to host the rural training centre, was one of the early sites of Basel mission activity in metropolitan Asante, and local church history (Ramseyer Memorial Presbyterian Church, Kwaso, 2003: 28) attributes this to the time that missionary Fritz Ramseyer spent there, following his capture in the Asante campaigns to the east of the River Volta in 1869.³ The church at Kwaso was inaugurated with only nine members in 1902, but after the opening of a primary school in 1905, the number of converts increased. It was one of the early graduates of this primary school, Charles ('Chas') Apea, who, as President of the Kwaso Improvement Society, promised to welcome and assist the mass education staff who came to be trained in the town (*Ashanti Pioneer*, 29 January 1952). We shall return to his story later on.

The Department's reliance on the graduates of mission and church primary schools was manifested in the teaching that was provided in the Twi night classes. In spite of the value that UNESCO experts placed upon specific adult teaching methods, the two weekend training courses offered to volunteer tutors could not compete with habits instilled by a decade or more of mission/church schooling. Mr S. K. Manu recalled an incident in which a fellow adult student in his class at Kwaso had drifted off to sleep: the volunteer or trainee tutor had banged him on the head, and, coming to with a start, the unfortunate student began to recite 'There is a cutlass lying on the ground' – which was possibly a line from his Twi primer (interview, 27 April 2004). The same informant speculated that many of his former classmates could no longer remember what they had learnt!

Mass education, like formal schooling, was associated with a change in everyday dress, and women were taught how to sew new types of clothing. Thus Mr Manu recalled that, as part of the 'exercise in enlightenment', 'mass education taught us [the men] to wear trousers and shirts, and the women learnt to put on dresses' (interview, 27 April 2004). He described an incident in which the female students of the adult literacy classes went to their literacy exam, wearing their best new dresses. They were mocked by local school children because, underneath these dresses, the women had the 'rump' of a loin cloth held up by waist beads, rather than the smooth back of those who had learned at school to wear 'proper' knickers. Mothers were effectively playing 'catch up' with children who had benefited from the opportunity of formal primary schooling and the familiarity that this brought with a range of novel consumer items.

Despite the fact that a primary school had opened in Kwaso in 1905, the Queenmother (Afua Gyamfuaa, aged approximately 90 in

³ This story was repeated in interviews, and I was shown the house where Ramseyer had stayed, but Kwaso does not feature particularly prominently in Ramseyer's own account of his captivity (1875 and 1901 translations).

2008) insisted that in her youth, 'girls did not go to school', and thus mass education represented a rare opportunity for adult women to acquire literacy and other skills (interview, 4 July 2008). Comfort Appeadjei was familiar with the 'women's work' that was based at the nearby town of Akyinakrom (2.5 miles from Kwaso), where the Department established a domestic science centre and employed her as a cook (interview, Kwaso, 10 March 2004). The Department hoped that female learners would use their new skills in their households and communities, acting as models of domesticity and becoming voluntary leaders of women's groups. Some of the women, however, instead made their way to the Asante capital, Kumasi, and generated cash income by dressmaking, or by baking and selling cakes, biscuits and doughnuts.⁴ Another old lady, Afua Hu, who had once won a prize for her writing in Twi, stated that she could not remember what she had written about because she had subsequently become so preoccupied with her dressmaking business.

According to Mrs Appeadjei, women invested some of this income in constructing modern houses in their hometowns and in paying children's school fees. She argued that, in a matrilineal system, Asante fathers tended to 'dodge' the expenses associated with children's education, referring this burden to their wives' brothers. She insisted that, in her experience, 'if the father will not pay, the uncle will also not pay', and that, in view of this male deficiency, it was essential for mothers to generate their own cash income (see also Allman and Tashjian 2000: 122–5). Mass education opened up valuable opportunities for women to acquire what development experts now describe as 'income-generating skills'. It is possible that the increase in school enrolment in Kwaso between the 1948 and 1960 censuses might be attributable not only to the opening of a new middle school in 1950, but also to greater parental ability and desire to meet the costs of formal schooling.

Some of the male learners were also interested in acquiring skills that would enable them to earn cash incomes. Those who learnt carpentry, masonry and bricklaying at the Kwaso rural training centre were sometimes able to find work with construction companies. Others, who were able to build upon the mother-tongue literacy classes to acquire a little English, were able to gain employment as clerks in cocoa-buying or timber companies. In the Amansie West area, a former volunteer tutor, Mr M. K. Amoako, recalled that some of the graduates of literacy classes became 'timekeepers' (foremen) in the Obuasi goldmines (interview, 26 April 2004).⁵

⁴When conducting interviews in Kwaso during the 1970s, McCaskie was told that local women were still doing brisk business in the production and retail of bread in the Atonso area of Kumasi. I am grateful to Tom McCaskie for discussing his field notes with me.

⁵The Department favoured mother-tongue literacy, and the great majority of Asante learners were taught in Twi. Mineworkers were taught in English for two specific reasons: first, they had learned to speak it in the course of their work, and second, as many of them were migrants from the North, there was no common mother tongue.

At one level, then, mass education among adults was delivered in a manner reminiscent of mission/church primary schooling, and appears to have produced some of the same effects as those famously described by Philip Foster (1965). Some adult learners measured their own success in the same terms as they measured that of their school-aged children: their preferred outcomes were increased participation in the cash economy and access to novel consumer goods. In the Mponua area, where both male and female learners were well served by training centres, individuals acquired a range of new skills, and some chose to put these to economic use in the nearest town, Kumasi.

The hope that mass education would stem rural–urban migration was unrealistic, not simply because of the economic opportunities on offer in Kumasi, but also because of a much older cultural association of the Kumasi lifestyle (*kumasesem*) with cosmopolitanism and sophistication. The residents of Kumasi (*kumasefo*) had long had the opportunity to ‘see’ and engage with influences and products of the Islamic Sahel as well as European imports from the coast. By contrast, the term ‘villager’ (singular *okuraaséni*, plural *ɲkuraasefo*) was an insult: rural dwellers were not only less ‘refined’, but also further removed from the seat of political power and thus more vulnerable to exploitation (Arhin 1983: 474–5; McCaskie 1995: 84–5). These cultural categories predated mass education by more than a century, and may explain why there seems to have been little resistance in the 1950s to the idea that rural people were ‘backward’ and in need of ‘enlightenment’. Mass education, then, gave some people new skills that enabled them to take up particular opportunities in the 1950s exchange sector, to make new types of investment, and to enjoy new forms of consumption. The underlying dynamic of rural–urban migration, however, was historically and culturally familiar: individuals could increase their wealth, and diversify their knowledge and experience, by tapping into economic networks that converged on Kumasi.

IMPROVING THE TOWN AND ‘CLEARING THE WEEDS’

However, while the draw of Kumasi is central to twentieth-century Asante history (McCaskie 2000), this was not the only factor at work in local understandings of mass education. In the censuses of 1948 and 1960, farming remained the single largest occupational category for both males and females in Kwaso. Rural–rural migration was as important as rural–urban migration for those farmers who were participating in the second wave of expansion in cocoa planting. By the 1950s, Kwaso had very little vacant land that was suitable for farming cocoa. Those who had access to this land could use the proceeds of their first crop to pay for the use of land elsewhere (particularly in Ahafo). Those who could muster up the capital from trading, employment or loans, could also pay for the use of land, whilst those who lacked the capital had to operate on a sharecropping basis.

Income from cash cropping certainly increased consumption, including the building of modern houses, the acquisition of new items, and putting children through formal education. But considerable time and money were also invested in new forms of socializing. According to Mr S. K. Manu (interview, 4 July 2008) 'another thing mass education taught us was brass bands. We were having two bands, the Black Beats and the Moscow Band. I was with the Moscow, and one time we went to Wassa [Western Region]. The Wassa people did not think that Asantes could play . . . but when I took up my trumpet, they were amazed' Kwaso residents constructed a tennis court on the basis of local donations and communal labour, while boxing contests also became a popular form of sport and entertainment (*Ashanti Pioneer*, 19 August 1954).

Spreading out from the rural training centre at Kwaso, the Mponua area experienced a boom of small-scale self-help projects, carried out through communal labour under the auspices of mass education. These included the construction of school buildings, roads, culverts and village halls, and the installation of 'Henderson boxes' to improve the quality of drinking water.⁶ The more ambitious towns, or those which had privileged access to resources (see below), also constructed health facilities, such as the maternity clinic at Kwaso. Indeed, for some informants, it was these projects—and not the literacy classes—that were synonymous with 'mass education'. The former MEA, Mr Oduro Kwateng, despite being a personal believer in the primacy of literacy, ventured the opinion that 'the Asante liked the project work more than the classes' (interview, Ashanti-Akropong, 9 March 2004).

In contemporary newspaper reports and during interviews, no reference was made to any conflict between the material advancement of individuals and the collective improvement of their hometown through community development projects. Whereas colonial policy makers were persistently concerned that education alienated individual school leavers from their rural communities and encouraged rural–urban migration, participants in mass education appear to have taken as axiomatic the principle that each town required a critical mass of successful 'enlightened' individuals in order to 'progress' (ɲkɔsoɔ—literally 'go forward'). Thus when graduates of the literacy classes acquired employable skills, or started their own small businesses in Kumasi, they were mentioned in interviews as part and parcel of the progress of their hometown under mass education.

Peel (1978: 150) indicates that, for the Yoruba, 'Olaju was . . . a precondition for individual advance, and for communal advance principally as an aggregated effect of that of successful individuals.' Asantes may have held a similar understanding, and, if so, it would

⁶ PRAAD, Kumasi, ARG 2/8/24 contains an extensive list of projects conducted in Asante in 1954. According to Abloh and Ameyaw (1997: 281) a 'Henderson box' was 'a tank that stored water that had been directed from a stream through concrete channels into a coarse filtration tank containing sand and stone. Also, it had a platform for women and children to stand on when fetching water.'

seem that part of the popularity of mass education lay in the opportunities it provided to combine individual and communal progress. When present in the town, a successful individual could perform communal labour on projects, and, whilst absent, he or she could make a financial contribution towards the cost of materials. School-building projects increased the opportunities for an individual's children to succeed in formal schooling, while road-building projects enhanced the opportunities of individuals to market their crops, to trade or to work in Kumasi. Berry (2001: 10–11) similarly observes that whilst certain forms of compulsory manual labour encountered resistance in early colonial Asante, villagers sometimes undertook road building voluntarily, because they were quick to recognize the economic benefits that followed in the wake of motorized transport.

As Ghanaian civil servants replaced expatriates at the regional and national levels, the Department's publicity materials argued that 'communal effort for better living is characteristic of the Ghanaian', and they drew the following analogy:

When the Akan spoke of *nnɔboa*, he was talking about getting his friends to come and help him clear his farm so that when their turn came he would join others to assist in their farms. Community Development, when it came, had something on which to fasten. (Department of Social Welfare and Community Development 1959: 4)

Arhin (1983: 472) suggests that, in nineteenth-century rural Asante, *nnɔboa* was organized by groups of bridegrooms who needed help to clear their prospective in-laws' farms and thus further their marriage negotiations. Austin (2005: 110–11) acknowledges that documentary sources on *nnɔboa* are limited, but he regards it less as a fixed ingredient of Akan culture, and more as a dynamic practice which small-scale farmers adapted and intensified in order to ease their entry to cocoa cash-cropping in the first half of the twentieth century. Whereas chiefs called upon the labour of their subjects to make some of the earliest cocoa farms in Asante, this option was not available to commoner farmers, who were also no longer able to purchase slaves. Those who lacked a large number of dependants might join with others in a similar position to form a work group. All the members worked together to clear one individual's piece of land, and when they were done, they would move on to the next individual's piece of land.

Through *nnɔboa*, small-scale farmers were able to make much larger farms than would have been possible with only the labour of their conjugal unit, and even when the hiring of contract labourers became more widespread from the 1920s, many farmers chose to continue to participate in *nnɔboa* (Austin 2005: 313–18 and 409–15). The practice did not imply any collective rights to use the piece of land, and farmers were not obliged to share the yield. *Nnɔboa*, then, was a group endeavour that brought tangible economic benefits to each of the individual farmers who participated in it. The analogy between 1950s

self-help projects and *nnɔboa* resonated not with a romanticized notion of Akan collectivism, but with a cooperative mechanism through which a larger number of individuals could create new wealth.

‘IT BROUGHT SOME KIND OF NEATNESS TO MANKIND’

Not all self-help projects, however, were related to the accumulation of wealth. Indeed, one point that Mr S. K. Manu chose to emphasize was that mass education had improved ‘environmental cleanliness’ in the town. At the end of a discussion with Mr Manu and Mr Kwadwo Nkatia, my research assistant, Isaac Kwabena Frimpong, concluded: ‘what they are saying is that it brought some kind of neatness to mankind’ (27 April 2004). Many of the community development projects that were favoured in Asante villages during the 1950s seem to have used new materials and techniques to implement pre-existing ideas about ordering and cleansing human space. Visible improvements in the 1950s often took the form of tarring of the main street and the roads that led out towards other villages, improving the water supply through the construction of ‘Henderson boxes’, laying guttering, and constructing culverts. This work does not seem so far removed from the tasks that T. E. Kyei outlined in his description of his childhood in Agogo in the 1910s: the brushing of weeds from around the town was undertaken by non-chiefly males; the sweeping of compounds, and cleanliness around sources of water was undertaken by women; boys cleaned the latrines used by adult males; girls cleaned the female latrines and carried rubbish to a designated place (Allman and Kyei 2001: 91–2).

Buildings constructed under mass education also testify to the endurance of older ideas about human living space. Expatriate civil servants were familiar with, and had attempted to introduce to the Gold Coast, the recommendations of Jane Drew and E. Maxwell Fry’s classic text, *Village Housing in the Tropics*. Fry and Drew argued that compound housing had originally developed as a means of sheltering a family and its belongings against ‘danger and thieves’. As ‘the days of tribal warfare’ were now over, they advocated new lay-outs, such as terraces flanked by two verandas, which would allow for a flow of air through each room, and a separation of household work (such as cooking and laundry) from family leisure (which could be enjoyed on the second veranda) (1947: 29–30). Asante villages were served by a series of Mechanical Field Units (MFUs) that were financed by the Cocoa Marketing Board and administered by the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development. Archival records indicate that the services of these units in construction projects were in consistently high demand.

And yet, when visiting the homes of former mass education students, tutors and employees, I noted that Drew and Fry’s advice had been applied only selectively. Modern building materials (particularly sandcrete blocks and roofing sheets) had been extensively used in

construction, but the lay-out of many houses conformed to the older Asante compound style. The town of Kwamo (less than five miles from Kwaso) was completely rebuilt on a new site under the auspices of the Department during the mid-1950s, because, when a new Kumasi–Ejisu road was constructed, the chief decided that the town must move to be alongside it. The house that I visited was a compound, and reproductive labour was carried out in the courtyard as I sat and talked (interview with Nana Kwaku Adusei, 28 April 2004). McCaskie (1992: 221) argues that Asante society ‘was forged in a confrontation with nature... quite literally hacked, hewed and wrested from the primary forest’. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the Asantes who participated in mass education in the 1950s should have taken up the opportunity of new materials and new techniques in order to pursue older ideals about cleanliness and orderliness in human living space, and about the separation of this space from ‘the bush’.

While expatriate civil servants still exerted considerable influence over statements of government mass education policy in the early 1950s, their capacity for intrusion or compulsion was limited. Implementation depended on the outcomes of negotiations between Asante students, tutors, volunteers and salaried professionals in the districts and the villages, and participants were able to select from what government had to offer, and adapt it to their own purposes. One *odikro* (village headman) summarized for the *Ashanti Pioneer* (8 July 1952) what had been achieved in his area and with his people: mass education ‘helped us to keep our secrets and see a glimpse of civilization’. One might conclude, then, that in this period of decolonization mass education was an ‘appropriate’ development strategy. But how did participants conceptualize the relationship between mass education and citizenship? And what did this have to do with democratization—or, more specifically, with the shift away from Native Authorities towards elected local government?

SANBALLAT AND TOBIAS

Although these projects were popular and successful, they did not always stem either directly from the literacy class or from the initiative of other local adults. According to former MEAs, it was they—the government employees—who initiated projects by surveying the circumstances and needs of a village, and then winning over the chief and his elders. As Mr Oduro Kwateng (interview, 9 March 2004) put it, ‘This is basic propaganda. If you fail in this, all else will fail.’ Similarly, the former literacy examinations officer, Nana Adjei Turum, indicated that it was the salaried employees who appealed for the services of the MFUs and who took proposed projects to the Local Development Committee (LDC) in order to secure funding for materials (interview, 29 April 2004).

Although these projects were conceived ‘from above’, by the Department, their execution depended greatly on the cooperation of

the chief. The Kwasohene, Kwame Ntiamoah II, was described as a staunch supporter of mass education. This support was evidenced by his habit of sitting down underneath his palanquin from sunrise to sunset, surveying projects and ensuring that communal labour was carried out to a satisfactory standard (interview with S. K. Manu, 4 July 2008). Kwadwo Nkatia—a ‘foreman’ who had helped to supervise communal labour in Kwaso—explained that the people were summoned by the chief’s *gong gong* and recalcitrant individuals who refused to participate were hauled before the chief and fined, two shillings and sixpence for a woman, and five shillings for a man (interview, 27 April 2004).

There was no legislation that required villages to impose such penalties, nor, to my knowledge, any Departmental policy that recommended them. It would appear, then, that this practice developed on the initiative of rural Asantes as they undertook the day-to-day implementation of community development projects. When pressed on the reasons for non-participation, Kwadwo Nkatia alluded to individuals’ bad character and even perversity: ‘Some people always want to be doing things in the other direction.’ In Ashanti-Akropong, Mr Oduro Kwateng, as we have seen, referred to the Book of Nehemiah: he likened the non-participants in community labour to the Old Testament ‘baddies’, Sanballat and Tobias, who attempted to undermine Nehemiah’s efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (interview, 9 March 2004).

Parents and teachers were accustomed to training the characters of children, sometimes through harsh physical discipline. For adults, reputation, or one’s ‘good name’ (*diy pa*) took the place of beating in providing leverage over behaviour. The fining of non-participants in 1950s community development projects may have been a means of correcting individuals’ characters and educating them about their social obligations. Mr Oduro Kwateng argued that this was one of the main personal benefits that he derived from his six years as an MEA:

I would say that mass education has built me, on the educational aspect of life . . . when you belong to that work, you yourself will have improvement. Mental improvement as well as educational improvement. It will teach you to know what is right and to do what is right. (Interview, 9 March 2004)

However, when pressed further on the bad character (*suban bònè*) of non-participants, Mr Oduro Kwateng also indicated that these were the *Kwaku-Sabi* people—the ‘know-it-alls’.⁷ The objection to such people appears to have been that they were too arrogant to appreciate that their own interests were served by community development. Those who were sufficiently humble to embrace literacy classes and the associated projects were also perceptive enough to see in them the

⁷I am grateful to Kwame Kwarteng and Isaac Kwabena Frimpong for discussing (separately) the meaning of *Kwaku-Sabi*.

potential for combining individual and collective benefits. Mr Oduro Kwateng took particular pride in explaining how he had persuaded a wealthy but illiterate transport owner that 'he should not feel too big to attend the classes'. Thus participation in classes and projects could be presented to successful individuals as a means of guarding their good name against accusations of selfishness and superiority. Mass education perhaps provided a mechanism for reconciling one of the tensions that McCaskie identifies as developing in nineteenth-century Asante: a powerful impulse towards individual accumulation and advancement existed alongside a rural social order that demanded 'sharing, humility and communal wellbeing' (1995: 78).

As we have seen, some mass education participants emphasized the importance of literacy in creating awareness of new and better ways of living. They often linked this kind of 'enlightenment' to their conversion to Christianity and their experience of formal schooling. Paradoxically, other participants also argued that illiterates could be perceptive – they could have 'foresight' in identifying their own longer-term interests and those of the town. Such 'foresight' was attributed to the illiterate Kwamohene who took the decision to completely rebuild his town at the side of the new Kumasi–Ejisu–Accra road, having appreciated the importance to the road to the marketing of crops (interview with Nana Kwaku Adusei, 28 April 2004).

Mass education staff, tutors and volunteers thus implied that a combination of humility, foresight and sociability generated willingness to participate in classes and projects. These traits were integral to Asante notions of good character (*suban pa*), and this state of good character was deemed to influence the individual's capacity to access 'enlightenment' through mass education. Gyekye (1987: 149 and 153) suggests that Akan emphasis on character training shares some similarities with Greek ethics. Colonial policy advisers sitting on London-based committees specifically identified these ethics as a basis for citizenship education in Africa (ACEC 1948). Local interpretations of mass education shared policy makers' abstract emphasis on individual character, but sometimes reversed the order. Policy tended to assume that education should improve character, whereas for some Asante it was pre-existing good character that enabled individuals to appreciate the benefits of mass education.

'EFFICIENT ADMINISTRATION OF FUNDS'

How, then, could this conception of good citizenship be reconciled with the more mundane mechanisms that were required for the administration, financing and maintenance of projects? In 1948, LDCs operating under the chairmanship of the District Commissioner received annual grants through the Department of Social Welfare [and Community Development].⁸ Grants were disbursed in order that

⁸ Community Development was formally added to the Department's title in 1952.

villages willing to undertake communal labour could afford to purchase the materials that were required for their desired self-help project. In 1952, the Department's director, Peter du Sautoy, expressed his doubts that the parallel structures for local government and community development could or should be sustained. A lively debate ensued about the effect that this might have in increasing the tendency of villages to request LDC funds for 'inappropriate' projects. Feeder roads and school buildings were entangled with the responsibilities of other government departments, and would ultimately require local council expenditure (in the form of teachers' salaries, for example), and therefore did not fall within the civil servants' definition of 'pure' community self-help.⁹ The Department's regional officer in Asante argued that the ideals of community development needed to be protected from the operating principles of most elected African councillors who, he claimed, were preoccupied with staking out a fair share of funds for the particular area they happened to represent.¹⁰

As the new system of local government came into being in 1952, elected local councillors struggled to elicit clear responses as to where control of funds and projects lay. Mponua Local Council belonged to the Kumasi South District, which had its own District Community Development Committee (DCDC). In principle, local councils sent their representatives to the DCDC, where they could make decisions about project funding in collaboration with the Government Agent (formerly the District Commissioner) and the salaried officers of the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development. In August 1952, the Mponua Local Council noted that it had not received any funds from the DCDC. Upon further inquiry, it transpired that the DCDC would not release funds until projects had received the approval of an officer of the Department, and that this approval could be (and indeed was) denied in cases where the evidence of community initiative was deemed inadequate. In July 1953, the DCDC made an explicit decision to transfer control of project finance back to Kumasi South District's team of mass education staff, 'where efficient administration of funds could be expected'.¹¹ The justification was that, where funding had been released to elected local councils in 1952, it had then been passed down to committees in villages where projects were sited, and that this had resulted in inadequate accounting and auditing.¹² Elected local councillors were effectively excluded from control of project finance, which remained in the gift of civil servants.

⁹ Dickinson, Ministry of Local Government to Community Development (CD) Director, 3 June 1952; CD Director to Chief Commissioner, Ashanti, 4 June 1952; Director to CD officers, Winneba, Ho, Tamale, Kumasi, 21 June 1952. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 2/15/8/10.

¹⁰ Owen Barton, Acting Chief Community Development Officer, Ashanti, to Director of Social Welfare and Community Development (SWCD), Accra, 27 October 1952. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 2/15/8/10.

¹¹ Mponua Local Council Minutes 30 May, 1 and 7 August 1952. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 6/11/1/22.

¹² Minutes of the Kumasi South District CD Committee, 16 May and 18 July 1953. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 6/11/1/46.

In January 1955, the Government Agent informed the newly constituted DCDC that it could not meet unless the Government Agent plus a member of the Department were present. Only in April 1956 did the Department clarify that the DCDC should include a two-thirds majority of elected members.¹³ But this concession was accompanied by a suggestion that projects should be supervised by the District Council's clerk and works foreman, along with mass education staff and the village committee of the community where the project was sited. In other words, the local councils would be bypassed altogether. One anonymous opponent scribbled in pencil, 'What authority does a Community Development Officer have to give order to Council staff?' The minutes, however, do not answer this pertinent question. Senior expatriate civil servants doubted the efficiency and integrity of elected local councillors, and feared that they were incapable of understanding the 'spirit' of community development through self-help. Despite the rhetoric about building local democracy, civil servants clung to the notion that they had a special form of expertise, and obstructed attempts to reduce their own powers in favour of those of the elected local councils.

However, it is also clear that the potential tax base in many parts of Asante was increasing during the 1950s on the back of cocoa cash-cropping. Why, then, were councils unable to raise more local revenue over which they could retain full control? In addition to the farmers who belonged to and 'served' the local stools in Mponua, by the 1950s there was a second and even third generation of 'stranger' cocoa farmers, each of whom had paid 'drinks money' to the caretaker chief for granting use of the land, as well as paying 'cocoa tribute' on each productive tree (see Berry 2001: 8–20). This represented a significant source of revenue for the stools.

In November 1952, the Mponua Local Council was visited by James Oppong—a representative of the Kumasi State Council of chiefs. Mr Oppong wished to clarify that whilst chiefs and *odikro* remained the caretakers of the land, the new Local Government Ordinance required them to declare their interest in any revenue-yielding land (such as cocoa farms), and to share this revenue with the new local council. Mr Oppong suggested that the Mponua Local Council should receive 45 per cent of this revenue, while the caretaker chiefs (such as the Kwasohene) would receive 35 per cent and the Kumasi State Council 20 per cent.¹⁴

In May 1953, the Mponua Local Council invited all landowners and caretakers of stool lands to a meeting to clarify how much cocoa tribute had been collected and what proportion of this should be directed to the Council's treasury. Although the caretakers failed to turn up in June 1953, they did attend a second meeting that was

¹³ Minutes of the Kumasi South District CD Committee, 22 January and 6 April 1956. *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Mponua Local Council minutes, 7 November 1952. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 6/11/22.

called in July, where it was decided to form a sub-committee of councillors who would conduct individual interviews with the chiefs concerned. There is no record of what passed in these interviews, but by November 1953 the Council reported that it had failed to establish how much money the chiefs had collected from the farmers, and, with so many farmers travelling to Ahafo (where they were acquiring further farms), it had also proved impossible to extract this information from the farmers themselves. The assessment of cocoa tribute was further delayed when the police took two local tax collectors into custody for misappropriation of funds, and relations between the Kwasohene and the elected local councillors deteriorated sharply.¹⁵

In the same year, the Department reviewed its earlier choice of Kwaso as the site for its rural training centre. Kwabena Sakyi, *odikro* of the neighbouring town, Akyinakrom, complained to the Mponua Local Council that it was through the 'sterling cooperation' of the staff and students of his town's Methodist school that Akyinakrom had become the 'birth place of mass education in the Kumasi District'. Sakyi stated that he would match the Kwasohene's offer of land, and indeed better it, since his proposed site was closer to a potential supply of piped water.¹⁶ The Mponua Local Council, however, did not have the authority to resolve this dispute between Kwaso and Akyinakrom, as decisions about the training centre rested with firstly with the Department, and ultimately with Kojo Botsio, the CPP's Minister for Education and Social Welfare. And this is where we return to the story of Charles 'Chas' Apea.

Earlier, we encountered Apea as the President of the Kwaso Improvement Society, welcoming the mass education trainees to Kwaso (*Ashanti Pioneer*, 29 January 1952). As one of Asante's first professional photographers, Apea was well acquainted with Krobo Edusei, who had worked as a reporter on the *Ashanti Pioneer* prior to becoming a CPP member of the Legislative Assembly, and a minister in Nkrumah's administration. Following the anti-colonial riots of 1948, Apea was listed in a police intelligence document as an associate of Edusei, and was blamed for leading the attacks on the United Africa Company shop in Kingsway Street, Kumasi.¹⁷ Apea was the leader of the Mponua Odo Kuo (young men's association) when Meyer Fortes visited Kwaso in 1945, and he was elected to the Mponua Local Council in 1952.¹⁸ When asked in 2008 about his relationships with Edusei and Botsio, Apea's relatives simply stated: 'Let us put it this way: he was very well-connected', and upon learning of Akyinakrom's rival claim to the rural training centre, Apea proceeded to Accra to 'negotiate' (interview with Osei Asuming Hubert and Akwasi Agyeman, Kwaso, 6 July 2008).

¹⁵ Mponua Local Council minutes, 29 May, 25 June, 31 July, 27 November and 18 December 1953. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 6/11/22.

¹⁶ Mponua Local Council Complaints, Odikro of Akyinakrom, 19 September 1953. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 6/7/14.

¹⁷ List from C. D. W. Owusu to D. C. Allen, June 1948. PRAAD Kumasi, ARG 1/1/25/1.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Tom McCaskie for sharing Fortes' note on Mponua with me.

There is, of course, no record of what passed in these negotiations, but the *odikro* complained further to the Mponua Local Council that, when the two towns were visited by the Department's decision-making board, someone in Kwaso had mustered up the resources for a welcoming party and a tour to display that town's enthusiasm, whilst Akyinakrom had been caught off-guard. The *odikro* clearly felt that someone in the Council had influenced the manner in which the decision was made. It would seem that Apea recognized the relative institutional impotence of the elected local council: it had been defeated, both by the chiefs (over revenue from cocoa tribute) and by the civil servants (over the administration of community development projects). Apea thus by-passed the chiefs, the civil servants and the Council, and took his issue directly to the CPP ministers with whom the ultimate power now lay. In this respect, Apea played the trump card, and for the next decade or so, it seemed that he had had the last laugh.

Kwaso, then, kept the rural training centre, and a significant face-saving gesture was made to Akyinakrom, which would host a women's training centre instead. When Kwaso residents stated that Apea had 'brought mass education to the town', they were referring not only to his voluntary activity with the Kwaso Improvement Society, but also to his singular service in retaining the training centre, for with the centre came a constant stream of trainee staff and funding for projects that were 'showcased' to visiting international experts. Ironically, Mr S. K. Manu recalled that, despite having kept the training centre, Kwaso witnessed a diminution in mass education activity in the later 1950s. While, for some months, the supporters of the (Asante) National Liberation Movement and their opponents in the CPP had been able to cooperate in community development projects, relations took a turn for the worse following the party-political destoolment of the Kwasohene in 1956, and his subsequent detention. There were periods in which young men could no longer go down to the town without entering a cutlass fight. The 'usurper' chief was also said to be less committed to mass education, even by those who had supported the CPP (interview with Kofi Ameka Obeng, Kwaso, 6 July 2008). In this respect, perhaps no one in Kwaso had the last laugh – although Kwame Ntiemoah was doubtless pleased to be re-enstooled after the demise of the CPP in 1966.

CONCLUSION

Policy advisers in London and civil servants in the Gold Coast were preoccupied with the building up of character and service through voluntary endeavour. They operated under the following stated assumptions: (1) that character-building voluntarism at the village level depended upon the prior achievement of mass mother-tongue literacy; (2) that voluntary communal endeavour would improve social cohesion by countering the alienating and individualizing effects of formal education; (3) that community self-help would reduce competition

for government resources by enabling villages to develop themselves more effectively; and (4) that it would serve as a support to elected local government, which in turn would form the basis of a stable and democratic nation state. Lip service is still paid to these assumptions in some of Ghana's present-day adult literacy programmes.

The Asante who participated in mass education during the 1950s thought differently. They seem to have thought: (1) that pre-existing good character determined an individual's willingness to participate in mass education and thus to enjoy its benefits (of which literacy was not necessarily the most important); (2) that there was no necessary conflict between individual and communal advance, as the two were inextricably linked; (3) that mass education programmes were a resource distributed by central government in cooperation with local chiefs, and that valuable benefits should be competed for; and (4) that elected local government did not control comparable resources and was less important than relationships with chiefs and national politicians in deciding the outcomes of inter- and intra-community competition.

In researching this article, I wanted to explain why, in the era of African nationalism, a literacy and development strategy that appeared to concur with both material needs and cultural values could not be sustained through structures of democratic local government. However, the people I spoke to in Asante in 2004 and 2008 would probably be surprised by my emphasis on this failure. Mass education was popular because it provided opportunities for people to select from what government had to offer and use it to pursue the ideas in which they had most confidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by a Nuffield Foundation New Career Development Fellowship. I am extremely grateful to Mr P. Owusu-Donkor and Mr Isaac Kwabena Frimpong for organizing meetings with former mass education participants and making many insightful, stimulating comments. This article would not have been possible without their input. Lynne Brydon, Tom McCaskie, Stephan Miescher, Beatrice Duncan, Kwame Kwarteng, Sarah Rench, Fran Amery and two anonymous *Africa* readers have all helped me along the way.

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with mass education in late colonial Ghana. The first part examines how people in the Ashanti Region interpreted and responded to a policy that was conceived in the period of power sharing between an African nationalist legislative assembly and a civil service that was still dominated by British expatriates. Literacy campaigns and related community development activities were shaped by the expectations and ideals of the Asantes who

participated as learners, tutors, volunteer leaders and salaried employees. Mass education was popular partly because new skills, techniques and materials could be used to pursue older ideals about enlightenment, progress, cleanliness and good character. Government policy indicated that literacy campaigns and community development activities would help to build democracy from the grassroots, yet, in spite of its popularity, mass education remained beyond the control of elected local government. The later part of this article focuses on the small town of Kwaso in order to establish why this was so and what one local resident was able to do about it.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de l'enseignement de masse au Ghana à la fin de la période coloniale. Dans une première partie, il examine l'interprétation et la réponse des populations de la région Ashanti à une politique conçue au cours de la période de partage du pouvoir entre une assemblée législative nationaliste africaine et une fonction publique toujours dominée par des expatriés britanniques. Les campagnes d'alphabétisation et activités communautaires connexes étaient déterminées par les attentes et les idéaux des Ashanti qui participaient en tant qu'enseignants, tuteurs, animateurs bénévoles et salariés. L'enseignement de masse recueillait une large adhésion populaire, en partie parce qu'il permettait d'utiliser des aptitudes, des techniques et des matériels nouveaux pour servir des anciens idéaux en matière d'instruction, de progrès, de propreté et d'intégrité personnelle. La politique gouvernementale précisait que les campagnes d'alphabétisation et les activités de développement communautaire contribueraient à bâtir une démocratie de la base; pourtant, malgré sa popularité, l'enseignement de masse a toujours échappé au contrôle du gouvernement élu local. Dans sa dernière partie, l'article se concentre sur la petite ville de Kwaso pour établir les raisons à cela et s'intéresser à l'action d'un résident local en réaction.